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SUBJECT: HONORING ALBANIA'S RECORD OF RESCUING JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

REFTEL: 07 TIRANA 1024

¶1. SUMMARY: Warren Miller, Chairman of the U.S Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage

Abroad, visited Tirana January 27-29 to take part in the country's first official ceremony marking Holocaust Remembrance Day. Miller's visit included addressing a plenary session of Parliament, participation in a remembrance ceremony with Prime Minister Berisha, receiving a medal of gratitude from President Topi, meetings with the Speaker of Parliament and other high-level government officials, and a meeting with Albanian rescuers and Jewish survivors. He also appeared on a popular TV talk show, attended a Holocaust-themed student art competition, and participated in a promotion of the Albanian translation of Elie Wiesel's "Night." Miller's visit garnered local and international media coverage, raising the country's positive profile by making Albanians' heroic rescue of Jewish refugees during WWII more widely known. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Warren Miller, Chairman of the U.S Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, visited Tirana January 27-29 to take part in the country's first official ceremony marking Holocaust Remembrance Day. In what was the centerpiece of the visit, Miller received a rare invitation to address a plenary session of Parliament. Prime Minister Berisha, representatives of Jewish and rescuer families, and members of the diplomatic corps were also present for the address, which received live TV coverage. Miller thanked the people of Albania for their heroism in saving the Jews during the Nazi Genocide, remarking, "When a dark shroud of evil fell upon Europe, and most European government officials refused to give sanctuary to Jews, Albania was a haven and a shining example of goodness... I say thank you Albania for your efforts, both in the not-so-distant past and in the present, to promote tolerance and help make this a better world. You have set an example for other nations to follow."

¶3. Parliamentary Speaker Jozefina Topalli opened the plenary session by forcefully expressing the need to punish all acts of inhumanity, from the Holocaust to contemporary terrorism, such as the September 11 attacks. She described Albanian actions during the Nazi Genocide as a great history, a story of a nation that did not hesitate to save Jewish refugees. The victims of the Holocaust, Topalli said, deserve the deepest homage, and the Albanians who protected Jews should be "placed on a pedestal for exhibiting the highest and most beautiful of human qualities." Their actions are a source of national pride, she said.

¶4. In other highlights of the visit, President Topi awarded a medal of gratitude to Miller for his and the Commission's work to promote Albania's image abroad. Miller, with the Ambassador and the Israeli Ambassador, also took part in the country's first official Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony held at the Office of the Prime Minister. Other commemorative activities that Miller attended included a Holocaust-themed student art competition and the promotion of the Albanian translation of Elie Wiesel's "Night." In addition, Miller appeared on a popular TV talk show.

15. During an informal lunch with representatives of rescuer and Jewish families, Miller sought deeper understanding of the motivations that caused ordinary citizens to risk their safety for strangers. While Jews were being deported and murdered elsewhere in Europe, Albanian citizens quietly offered protection to all Jews who asked for it. No authority told them to do so, nor did they ask anything in return. According to official and unofficial sources, Albanian families successfully hid between 1,200 and 2,000 Jews from various countries, making Albania the only country in Europe to have a larger Jewish population after the war than before. In response to Miller's question on motivations, family members offered no eloquent philosophical explanations. Instead, they referred to Albania's long tradition of religious tolerance, visible in its Hellenic era mosaics, and its ancient honor code, in which the guest in one's house has equal status with God.

16. COMMENT: Albanians' rescue of Jews during the terrible years of the Nazi genocide exemplifies the extraordinary religious and ethnic tolerance that is part of this country's cultural fabric. Unlike that of most other European countries, Albania has a great story of compassion and heroism to tell the world. With the Gershman photo exhibition (see reftel) and Miller's high profile visit to Tirana, that story is becoming better known. In addition, the Albanian Government plans to work closely with the U.S Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad to build a permanent memorial to Holocaust victims, which will commemorate both Albanian rescuers and those they saved. Albanians anticipate that memorial will serve as a focal point for future Holocaust commemorations.
END COMMENT.

WITHERS